



[Comment] Give Europeans the right to roam

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EUOBSERVER / COMMENT - The European Commission has announced an intention to cut the cost of using your mobile phone in another European country, reported by EUobserver.com last week. At present, you pay a substantial premium if you send or receive a call or a text message across a border.

The principle is that whoever makes the call shouldn't pay extra, which means that all the extra cost gets loaded onto the recipient

It is not obvious why it should cost a lot more to make calls across borders. It doesn't cost more to send an e-mail internationally. A phone call is a package of information sent through a network, that's all.

The network needs to have sufficient capacity to handle the international calls, which needs to be paid for, and there might be some administration because of the liaison between different companies in different countries (and of course, for those of countries outside the euro, that international liaison will have to carry the additional currency exchange costs).

But a mobile phone call between two people in the same country is not fundamentally different from one between two people in the same country. A bit more expensive would be fair enough, but not a lot more.

But why is this a matter for the European Commission at all?

Well, first, it's because the Commission serves as the policeman for the single market. The increased cost of making calls across borders arises precisely because of the existence of national borders within the market. The whole point of the single market is that these should be eliminated wherever possible. Borders should represent differences of culture and habit, not excuses for extra regulation.

Secondly, it's because a successful mobile phone network is good for the European economy as a whole. Mobile communications is one of the key growth areas in the modern economy and so the health of this sector is vitally connected to the health of Europe as a whole.

Indeed, the European Union played a major role in getting the GSM standard launched from the end of the 1980s onwards, realising the importance of a consistent format for mobile telephony in the future. There was the risk that each member state would instead establish its own standard, leading to a long, complex and expensive programme of integration later on. Much better to get it right first time.

So, let's hope that the Commission can make good progress bringing down prices so that consumers can take their phones across borders.

The mobile phone seems to be one of the few indicators remaining when you cross a border. I travelled from Munich to northern Italy through Austria and experienced for myself the realities of the new Europe.

There were no passport checks as we crossed national borders, we used the same money in each country, and the road signs followed the same format. In fact the only indication that we were crossing a border was the announcing bleep every time a text message arrived telling me how to transfer to a new network provider in each country. If the European Commission can act effectively, this is something that in future should become convenient and not an

excessive cost.

The author is director of Federal Union.

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